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Paul P. Brontas

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George J. Mitchell Oral History Project

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Paul P. Brontas (1)
(Interviewer: Mike Hastings)

GMOH# 065
February 20, 2009

(Significant revisions throughout; transcription edited without changes indicated; original recording restricted)

(For a related, fuller interview, see GMOH 207)

Mike Hastings: Okay. This is February 20, 2009. I'm in the Washington, excuse me, Waltham offices of – it has a long name now, it used to be Hale and Dorr, Wilmer, Cutler and Pickering – with Mr. Paul Peter Brontas. It is in the afternoon, we began at 1:30, I'm Michael Hastings, the interviewer; the interviewee is Mr. Brontas. And I'd like to begin by asking you to state your full name and to spell your last name.

Paul Brontas: Paul Peter Brontas, B-R-O-U-N-T-A-S.

MH: And your date of birth and place of birth.

PB: March 19, 1932, Bangor, Maine.

MH: Your father's full name?

PB: Peter Brontas.

MH: And mother?

PB: My mother's name was Penelope Brontas, her maiden name was Spiropoulos.

MH: Could you spell that for me?

PB: I think it's S-P-I-R-O-P-O-U Spiropou- L-O-S.

MH: Very good, thank you. Let's begin with your parents, can you, tell me something about your father's family first.

PB: My father's family, literally, I know very little about except members of the family that came over from Greece to the United States. My father was the youngest of three brothers. The oldest was my uncle George Brontas, who ran the Brontas Restaurant in Bangor, Maine. He started out with a candy kitchen where he made fudge and chocolates, which he eventually transformed into a very successful Bangor restaurant. Eventually saved enough money to help

bring his younger brother, my father, to America, who arrived, oh, sometime around 1910 or 1912.

And the interesting thing about his early life, which I never really learned much about, was service in the First World War in a Greek battalion that was composed of recent Greek immigrants. Little, if any, spoke English. I mean most of them, my uncle and my father, when they all came over to America, a small Greek group in Bangor, Maine, and married young Greek women who also were newcomers to America, and they all opened and ran restaurants.

MH: Were there other brothers?

PB: Yes, a third brother, John Brountas, who also lived and raised his family in Bangor.

MH: Any sisters?

PB: No, not that I knew of.

MH: Okay.

PB: In any event, he and lots of other recent immigrants became members of the U.S. Army. Thankfully, they were about to be shipped to France when the Armistice was declared and they of course were delighted because none of them, he told me, was prepared for warfare.

MH: I never heard of a Greek unit. I remember, of course I've heard of black units.

PB: Yeah, they had a Greek unit. But it turned out well for him because he not only quickly gained his U.S. citizenship, but he also quickly learned to speak English.

MH: Oh the army service entitled him to the citizenship?

PB: That's right. After returning from his military service, he started out working, I believe, with my uncle who then opened his own shop, which initially was a fruit store, and then became a candy store, and eventually a small restaurant at the corner, on Main Street, across from Bangor's then only hotel, became the Bangor House, while my uncle successfully continued to own and operate the Brountas Restaurant.

MH: Right.

PB: Down on Main Street.

MH: Okay, across the street from the Bangor House.

PB: Yeah. There's a bus terminal there now.

MH: Yes, okay, yeah.

PB: And my brothers Arthur and George continued to run the restaurant, with my mother – and all of the children also chipped in, including my two sisters, Helen and Georgia. My brother Nick, who was, I believe, the model for the family, was very bright and effective, and we all aspired to be like Nick who went off to Yale Law School and then became, the first of the three Brontas brothers who served as the mayor of the city of Bangor.

MH: Really, is that right?

PB: Yeah, successive order, you know, yeah.

MH: So where did you, where did your father live in town?

PB: We lived on Third Street in Bangor across the street from my father's brother George. Third Street was essentially a Greek ghetto, occupied principally by recent Greek immigrants. A block or so away, on Stanford Street, they helped build and finance the Greek Orthodox Church.

MH: Does that still exist today?

PB: That stills exists, yeah.

MH: Okay. And your mother, now, your mother, was she from Bangor as well?

PB: Yeah, she came to Bangor eventually. There is an interesting story of my mother, and I'd love to have written about her amazing life – a remarkable story. She came from the village of Vasara outside of Sparta, and my father's village was Vamvaku, which was also near Sparta, but they never met until they were both in the United States. Her mother and father died when she was a young girl. I guess there was no medical care in those small villages surrounded by Sparta. She had an older brother who worked very hard in the village and saved his money, and saved enough money to come to America.

However, the local priest called him in before he headed off to America and said, "You can't go." And the priest explained why. My uncle said, "I've been working hard to raise the money to go to America." And the priest said, "Well, sorry, but your sister will never marry in this village. She has no 'prika' (Greek for dowry) she doesn't have any goats or olive trees to give to a prospective husband in the village" (which was then a customary expectation of the groom's family). So after thinking it over, my uncle decided that he should give her the money. And she came to America where she lived, with a distant relative for a while, and eventually a marriage was 'arranged' with my father. All the marriages in those days in the Greek villages were arranged. She met and married my father, and then she moved to Bangor and raised six children.

MH: Okay.

PB: And proceeded to have a whole bunch of kids.

MH: Not, I mean that's not far off from the Senator's story.

PB: Yeah.

MH: You know, his mother coming over.

PB: Yeah, that's right, and similar to Sarbanes' story.

MH: Really?

PB: Yeah.

MH: Where did she live in Bangor, I mean she came to Bangor to marry your father?

PB: Yes.

MH: She wasn't there before.

PB: No, she wasn't there before.

MH: Okay, let's move to you and your, you are one of how many brothers you say?

PB: There are the four of us.

MH: Okay, what order, give me the order.

PB: My brother Nick was the oldest, my brother George is next, my brother Arthur, who's still living in Bangor, is next, and then I was the last one. I was the only one that was born in a hospital. You know, I mean all the neighbors would come by and the birth would be given, but I was told, or my mother was told that they couldn't safely deliver me and that I would not survive, I'd be born dead, I guess, or whatever it was. So my father didn't accept that, and he wandered around Bangor and found the name of a young doctor who talked to him, and the doctor said, "Well, let me see," and he looked at her and he said, "Well, you know, I think we can do this all right." And sure enough, my mother went to a hospital, the doctor performed as promised, and I was born.

MH: So Eastern Maine?

PB: Yeah, I think probably Eastern Maine at that time.

MH: The old Eastern Maine [Medical Center], right.

PB: Yeah. And the interesting part of that whole story is that his son, who also grew up to be a doctor, was at Bowdoin College with me at the same time I was there. And then he had a younger brother who went into the financial management business that my law firm hired to help run the investment management segment of our law firm – a small world.

MH: It really is, it is.

PB: So that's how I was born.

MH: So tell me about growing up in Bangor.

PB: It was fun, Bangor was fun. In the early years, we essentially lived in the Greek ghetto.

MH: Hmm-hmm.

PB: As I said, Third Street, Bangor was all Greek. Most everybody worked in restaurants, or candy kitchens -

MH: Right, right.

PB: - or that sort of thing, made candy and ice cream. But we all spoke Greek at home. When I went to kindergarten the school was right across the street so I just walked across the street, and ten minutes later I came back with tears in my eyes. And my mother said, "What happened?" And I said, "Well, you know, I didn't speak English and they kicked me out, they said they were unable to accept me, so here I am." My mother, who didn't speak English either, took me by the hand, walked across the street, went to the teacher and said, "He stay, he stay," she turned around and left, and I stayed.

The irony is, I mean, so I, you know, when you're a kid you pick up language very quickly, and so at the end of kindergarten they wanted to move me up one grade beyond where I would normally go into the second grade, or whatever it was. And my mother said, "No-no, you'll go to the first grade." That's how fast you learn a language as a kid, I guess.

MH: Do you retain any of your Greek language skills?

PB: Yes, somewhat, somewhat. We used to speak it at home because of my mother. My father always spoke English, but when he talked to me he spoke Greek – but my mother never got out, with all the kids and everything. And when she worked in the restaurant after my father died, I mean she learned to speak broken English but everybody could communicate with her, half Greek, half English.

MH: What were the houses like on Third Street, small houses?

PB: It was small, yeah.

MH: Small wooden frame?

PB: Yeah, and they were, there were six children, and my mother and father in that little house. I drove by it the last time I was in Bangor, I didn't recognize any of the building at all, I guess it had been added to or whatever.

MH: Right.

PB: Yeah, you know.

MH: Sports?

PB: Well, you know, we all had sports around the community. The only sport I was any good at, and I wasn't really good at it, was basketball.

MH: Hmm-hmm, hmm-hmm.

PB: You always had a hoop outside and you could play, and you played in the winter, you shoveled the snow off, and it was fun, great fun. I played the varsity basketball when I was in junior high school, and when I went to high school I remember they had a varsity team and a jv team, and I managed to stay on that jv team for about two games, and then I remember we were playing Millinocket with a JV team composed of several big strong guys and one of them came down from the hoop with his elbow, hit me in the head and knocked me out. That was it, that was the end of my basketball career. So I just decided to become a student.

MH: And what were your, what kind of student activities did you do in high school?

PB: I did about everything. I was a debater, I debated and I did a lot of public speaking.

MH: Hmm-hmm.

PB: I won the prize for the best speech about the U.S. Constitution in a statewide competition among Maine high school students, Bangor high school, and then came to Boston and participated in the New England competition.

MH: Really?

PB: Yeah, we had a -

MH: That's one of these, it's sponsored by some civic organization, probably.

PB: Yeah, and I came in second in New England in the competition. I also was editor of the newspaper, and president of the debating club. We had a very good group of high school

students, I mean really smart. My best friend went off to West Point. And a host of other classmates went on to excellent colleges.

MH: So that would be the high school that's now down across from the, well, it's not, next to the federal building.

PB: Yeah, that's right, yeah.

MH: Next to the library, yeah.

PB: So then when, you know, I was ready to graduate, I was going to go to the University of Maine, because that's where my brother Nick went, and that's where my brother George went. And my English teacher, who was terrific (we had great teachers in those days, I mean they were really extraordinary, when you look back on it), said, "You're not going to Maine, you're going to go to Bowdoin." I said, "I can't afford to go to Bowdoin." She said, "You're going to go to Bowdoin, Paul."

MH: Do you remember her name?

PB: Oh, God, I wish, I mean I probably had -

MH: This is interesting, because again, the parallel of the, how people got steered to Bowdoin is a very, almost, it's almost always, it's a teacher who took a special interest in a student in high school.

PB: She said, "We always send our best students to Bowdoin." And so anyhow, she said, "You should try for a scholarship," or something like that, and so I did and I got a scholarship, my first year. And again, this is going way out of track but it's an interesting story at the end of it.

I was fairly active on campus, I was a pretty straight-A student, and loved it, it was great, the teachers were great, inspiring and I, you know, I'd never had, lived in an atmosphere like that. And at the end of, or near the end of, the first year, the dean of Bowdoin College called me in. And I knew the dean because I was on a committee of some sort, Dean Kendrick was his name.

MH: Right.

PB: And a wonderful guy, but he couldn't look at you, he always used to turn around and look out the window when he was talking to you, he appeared to be shy.

So anyhow, he said, "I have some bad news, Paul: we're not going to be able to give you your scholarship next year." I said, "What?" I mean, I was a straight-A student, I was active, I was starting to do debate, I reviewed all the things that I was doing at Bowdoin and said, "I can't believe it." He said, "Well, I know it's hard for you to believe but there are people here who

have a greater need, financial need than you.” And I said, “Dean Kendrick, I can’t believe it, I mean how can you say that?” He said, “Well, you have a brother, two brothers living at home, and your mother works in the family restaurant, and we believe that they can help you pay” – and the tuition was not great at that time. I said, “Well, I can’t ask her for that. I’ll go to the University of Maine.” I said, “My brother Nick, he went off to Yale Law School.” And he said, “Well, don’t do anything rash,” or something like that.

This was in late, late in the year, maybe about a month or three weeks before term ended. So I went back to Bangor and I called University of Maine about enrollment and they said, “Come on up and we’ll talk to you, sure.” But in the meantime, Dean Kendrick got busy and contacted the Travelli Foundation, which was located in Boston. Travelli, I guess, was fairly rich, set up the money to provide scholarships for students who he expected would be active in the community and take a role in public life or whatever.

So the summer is going on and I’m prepared to go to [U]Maine. And I got a letter from the dean and he said, which I still have, it said, “Dear Paul, I just want to tell you how pleased I am that we have provided for a full tuition scholarship for your sophomore year, but not only for your sophomore year, but they’ve agreed to pay your tuition for your sophomore year, junior year, and senior year, and you don’t have to worry about this any more.” So I was going back to Bowdoin. Yay, yay. It, I mean I’ll never forget that, I mean it was amazing.

MH: So that would have been right after the war, right, I mean ‘46, ‘47?

PB: Yeah. Let’s see, I was the class of, what was the year, class of ‘50 Bangor, ‘54 in, yeah, ‘54 Bowdoin, class of ‘50 in Bangor.

MH: Hmm-hmm.

PB: And that was, you know, we all thought we were going to go into the war.

MH: What were your impressions of Bowdoin when you first got there as a freshman?

PB: Well I was, you know, I was naive. It was fairly sophisticated. First of all they had a lot of people who’d served in the army who were back, particularly the sophomores and juniors who had completed their freshman year and pulled out and had to go to war. And I, from an academic point of view, Bowdoin was super; I mean I was excited about everything I did. One of the principal reasons I was really happy with Bowdoin was the quality and friendship of its professors, I think if they had good students they really tried to work with them, and so I got a lot of help from people that pushed me.

You know, I remember my government professor would often scold me. He’d say, “I gave you an A-minus on that. I’d like to give you a lower grade but,” he said, “I know you can get a full A if you’ll only work harder.” So they were very inspirational, they sort of moved you along and made you want to do good. I lived in a fraternity, Alpha Delta Phi, and that was a new

experience for me, but it was kind of fun because there were a good group of classmates there, and there was an element where the older graduates from the army that sort of, you know, took interest in what you were doing and offered help and advice when needed.

MH: So the first year you were in a fraternity house? Okay.

PB: Yeah, yeah, it was great. And then I sort of moved up in the ranks in the fraternity, I became president of the fraternity and I tried to change some of the 'rules of the game.' We had one young fellow who's father was the president of a bank in Boston, who was a nice guy, and his, he had an older brother who'd gone to Bowdoin but he wasn't the Alpha Delta type, and I remember talking to his father who would have been very disappointed if his son did not become a member Alpha Delta Phi. So I helped to have him pledged to the fraternity, and I remember the people, my fraternity brothers, who were in those days, 'No women, no this, no that, no Jews,' were really upset at me but I stood my ground. And surprisingly, I became president of the fraternity and it was both lots of fun and a great learning experience, because we did many good things in those days. I don't know whether you had the same breadth of activities and opportunities, including inter-fraternity competitions in a wide area of activities. I mean it was really great fun and rewarding – especially the inter-fraternity singing competitions which my fraternity always seemed to win.

MH: Really?

PB: We used to go to the inter-fraternity singing competitions once a year, and each fraternity would march across the campus singing its selected songs. And the Alpha Delta fraternity always won. I mean we practiced seriously, and it engendered a nice spirit. And the older classmates really took care of the younger classmates, I mean after the first year, when they harassed them a lot. But, you learned some important lessons and, you were self-governing. I remember I pledged the first black student in my fraternity, I pledged the first Jew in my fraternity – I was almost thrown out for it. But I was a liberal and I think my Greek heritage was very helpful in dealing fairly with racial issues.

MH: It was an actual fraternity, is that right, it was an actual -

PB: Yeah, Alpha Delta Phi, yeah, yeah. And that was a great learning experience, you know, because you had to deal with a lot of different views, and at that time I also was interested in going into politics, so dealing with fraternity issues and problems became a significant part of my Bowdoin education.

MH: Now, did they have daily chapel?

PB: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Oh, you shouldn't even mention that.

MH: Well, if you were a speaker, did you have to speak at chapel?

PB: No. Chapel speakers were usually faculty members or enlightened guests. The chapel session was held at about 10 a.m. and usually consumed about thirty minutes. Traditionally the chapel presentations (which had nothing to do with religion or religious beliefs) were either irrelevant or awful, but each student had to attend a specified number of chapel sessions – it was compulsory and enforced. I recall, with much embarrassment, that one day I entered the chapel to record my attendance, and suddenly remembered that I had an afternoon exam that day for which I had not properly prepared. So I decided to record my attendance to the chapel monitor (who happened to be a fraternity brother) and then turned around and left the chapel. Incidentally, I was not the only one who ‘checked in but departed’ before the chapel program commenced that day. The next day I had a message attached to my dormitory room door from the Office of the Dean of Bowdoin instructing me to please promptly see Dean Kendrick.

So I went in to see the dean, and he said, “Brontas, we have a problem with you.” I said, “What is that?” “Well,” he said, “We have too many students going in and checking into chapel and then leaving before it starts, I was there taking the names of those people and I saw you do that,” he said. “So I’m going to make an example of you.” “Just me?” I said. You know, I said, “Other people were doing it.” He said, “No-no, we’ll do it,” he said, “so you’re going to be suspended.” “What does that mean?” He said, “I want you to go home and you get a letter from your parents acknowledging what you did, and then you can come back.” It was so embarrassing I could not believe it, I mean, oh God, what will my mother think of my stupid action.

So I went back to Bangor, hitch-hiking – I didn’t want to spend money to take the bus or train. When I arrived in Bangor, it was a very, very bad time for the family because my older brother Nick, who had been in the army during World War II which he spent in New Guinea, where he was exposed to and contacted malaria and tuberculosis, like so many other American soldiers stationed in that part of the world. When he returned after the war, he resumed his studies at the University of Maine (unaware of his malaria and tuberculosis contamination), graduated, and then went to Yale, Yale Law School.

So I got back to Bangor and I found out that my mother was up at the hospital because they had to remove a portion of my brother’s lung, and it was just an awful thing. So I wasn’t going to bother her, so my older brother, wrote a letter saying, “We’re very embarrassed about Paul and....”

MH: Your father had already died by this time, right?

PB: Yeah, yeah. How sad, you know, so anyhow I got back to Bowdoin and I was supposed to come back with a note from my mother. And I was waiting outside the Dean’s Office, it was about eight thirty in the morning, when the professor of Greek and Latin came by, and he knew me because we used to talk Greek once in a while -

MH: That was Nate Dane?

PB: Yup, Nate Dane, who asked, “What are you doing here, Paul?” I said, “Oh, I’m

embarrassed to tell you, Professor Dane.” ”Why not? What do you mean?” I said, “Oh, I was suspended.” Professor Dane, in a state of shock, said, “Suspended? Why?” So I said, “You know, I got a note here but it’s not from my mother, my mother doesn’t speak English or write English, and my brother was in the hospital in Bangor, and the family was afraid he was going to die and therefore I didn’t even mention it to my mother.” So anyhow, I waited and about ten, fifteen minutes later the dean invited me in and sat down, and quickly apologized, “I’m so sorry, Paul, I was unaware of your family problem, I chose you because you’re well known on campus.” I said, “Thanks a lot, I should set an example.”

So, three years later, I am a candidate for a Rhodes Scholarship, and also for a Marshall Scholarship.

MH: Right.

PB: And the Rhodes and Marshall Scholarship application forms ask, “Have you ever been disciplined?”, or something like that. So I called Dean Kendrick, I said, “I’d like to talk to you.” So I went to see the dean, who told me, “Paul, I think you got a good shot at one of those scholarships.” After we chatted briefly, he said, “What’s the problem?” I said, “Well, here’s a question which both applications ask: ‘Have you ever been penalized or reprimanded for violating any rules?’” He said, “Well obviously the answer is ‘no.’” I said, “Dean, do you remember my freshman year when I - ?” “Stop it, stop it, I don’t remember any of that.”

Bowdoin was not only a great college but also a very compassionate institution.

MH: It sounds like you know the dean very well, what about the other, what other professors were you particularly close to?

PB: Oh, Professor Daggett.

MH: Yes.

PB: Oh God, he was such a wonderful professor and mentor, and he often scolded me. “I have to give you an A-minus,” he said, “But I know you can do better.” I mean he was always pushing. But I was busy, and if I could get an A-minus, I didn’t care, right?

MH: I took international law from Professor Daggett.

PB: Oh, you did?

MH: Yes, and he was the acting president when I arrived on campus and he signed the matriculation book the fall of 1968. Great guy.

PB: He was the best professor I’ve ever had. In fact, my professors at Bowdoin far exceeded those that I had at Harvard Law School. You know, I think it is much better now, but something

was wrong with Harvard Law School at that time, in terms of teaching style and philosophy. But Bowdoin was truly great.

MH: Others that are particularly noteworthy that you recall?

PB: Oh, oh God, a history professor.

MH: Van Cleve? Tom Van Cleve?

PB: Van Cleve.

MH: Right.

PB: I loved him, I loved him. I don't know if you ever took a course from him. Before each class session, he would write a short outline on the blackboard that listed the distinctive facts and issues that he intended to discuss that day. His lectures were superbly organized and a wonderful study of culture, religion, art subjects, I mean things that I had never been exposed to in Bangor, Maine, and, you know, you just felt good and fulfilled, when you came out of his classroom. I really, that had so much value. I'll never, you know, probably never see any of that stuff. But all of my professors at Bowdoin were great. I mean I had a terrific group of professors who not only enlightened me, but inspired me.

MH: Do you have many associations from classmates and things that carried on afterwards?

PB: Not much. When I went to Harvard Law School, there were five Bowdoin graduates at Harvard Law School, a couple of whom were old Bowdoin. But my best friends at Harvard were Mike Dukakis and another Greek, Maryland Senator Paul Sarbanes, who was also a very close friend while we both were studying at Oxford.

(remainder of interview closed permanently at the request of the interviewee)

End of Interview